

Sir Edward Grey Turned Sarajevo Crisis Into War

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« Against Oligarchy – Table of Contents

Even after decades of British geopolitical machinations, it still required all of Sir Edward Grey's perfidy and cunning to detonate the greatest conflagration in world history by exploiting the diplomatic crisis surrounding the assassination of the Austrian heir apparent Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

Sir Edward Grey had learned an important lesson in the Moroccan crisis of 1911, when Germany sent the warship {Panther} to Agadir to secure German interests there, which were in conflict with those of France. This lesson was that if Germany clearly perceived in a crisis that there was a direct risk of Anglo-German war, Berlin would back down, frustrating the war party in London. In the Agadir crisis, the British minister Lloyd George had delivered a clear public warning to Berlin, and Germany had replied at once that she was not seeking a permanent presence on the Atlantic coast of Morocco; the crisis was soon resolved.

The German chancellor from 1909 to 1917, Dr. Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, was an anglophile and a crony of the kaiser's student days, anxious to make concessions to London in order to secure peace. Sir Edward Grey declared in 1912 that any differences between England and Germany would never assume dangerous proportions "so long as German policy was directed by" Bethmann-Hollweg.

During the Balkan Wars and the Liman von Sanders affair of 1913, Grey cultivated the illusion of good relations with Germany. By mid-1914, Anglo-German relations were judged by Sir Edward Goschen, the British ambassador to Berlin, as "more friendly and cordial than they had been in years." But it was all a trick by Perfidious Albion.

Some weeks after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Austrian government, blaming Belgrade, addressed a very harsh ultimatum to Serbia on July 23 demanding sweeping concessions for investigating the crime and the suppression of anti-Austrian agitation. The Russian court slavophiles were demanding war against Austria and Germany in defense of Serbia; these slavophiles were madmen on the strategic offensive who sought a general European war. In Vienna, the leading minister, Count Berchtold, and the chief of staff, Conrad von Hoetzendorff, were determined to use the crisis to smash Serbia, which they saw as a threat to the survival of their empire. Berchtold and Hoetzendorff were madmen on the strategic defensive, even if they assumed the tactical offensive against Serbia. Their aggressive intentions involved Serbia, but not other great powers. When Serbia issued a conciliatory reply to the Austrian ultimatum, Kaiser Wilhelm II and others

were relieved and thought that the war danger had receded; but the Vienna madmen seized on minor refusals by Serbia to declare war on July 28.

If Sir Edward Grey had sincerely wished to avoid war, he could have pursued one of two courses of action. The first would have been to warn Germany early in the crisis that in case of general war, Britain would fight on the side of France and Russia. This would have propelled the kaiser and Bethmann into the strongest efforts to restrain the Vienna madmen, probably forcing them to back down. The other course would have been to warn Paris and especially St. Petersburg that Britain had no intention of being embroiled in world war over the Balkan squabble, and would remain neutral. This would have undercut the St. Petersburg militarists, and would have motivated Paris to act as a restraining influence.

Grey, a disciple of Edward VII, did neither of these things. Instead he maintained a posture of deception designed to make Germany think England would remain neutral, while giving Paris hints that England would support Russia and France. These hints were then passed on to Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov, a British agent, and to Czar Nicholas II. In this way, French {revanchistes} and Russian slavophiles were subtly encouraged on the path of aggression.

Grey's deception of Germany meant assuming the posture of a mediator rather than a possible party to the conflict. In early and middle July, Grey proposed direct conversations between Vienna and St. Petersburg to avoid war, but dropped this when French President Poincaré, a war-monger, responded that this would be "very dangerous." On July 24, Grey shifted to a proposal for mediation by other great powers of the Austrian-Russian dispute. On July 26, Grey proposed a conference of ambassadors from England, France, Italy, and Germany, which was declined by Germany for various reasons. Grey's charade of war avoidance contributed to complacency in Berlin and a failure to do anything to restrain the Vienna crazies, since, the kaiser thought, if England did not fight, France and Russia were unlikely to do so either.

Edward VII's son King George V made a vital contribution to the British deception. Late on July 26, King George V told the kaiser's brother, Prince Henry, who was visiting England, that Britain had "no quarrel with anyone and I hope we shall remain neutral." This was seized upon by the pathetic kaiser as a binding pledge of British neutrality for which, he said "I have the word of a king; and that is sufficient for me." The gullible Kaiser Wilhelm was kept thoroughly disoriented during the last critical period when Germany could have forced Vienna to back down and avoid general war, before the fateful Russian and Austrian mobilizations of July 30 and 31.

THE DECLARATION OF WAR

It was late on July 29 before any warning of British armed intervention in the looming conflict was received in Berlin. When German forces entered Belgium in the context of the

Schlieffen Plan (the German plan for a two-front war against France and Russia), Grey declared war at midnight Aug. 4-5, 1914.

The British were the first of the great powers to mobilize their war machine, in this case the Grand Fleet of the Royal Navy. On July 19, the British had already staged a formidable naval demonstration with a review of the Grand Fleet at Portsmouth. On the afternoon of July 28, Winston Churchill ordered the fleet to proceed during the night at high speed with no lights from Portsmouth through the Straits of Dover to its wartime base of operations at Scapa Flow, north of Scotland. On July 29, the official “warning telegram” was sent out from the Admiralty; the British fleet was now on a full war footing.

The first continental state to mobilize had been Serbia, on July 25. The order of general mobilizations was Serbia, Great Britain, Russia, Austria, France, and, finally, Germany.

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